

Historic Wallpapers

1750–1949

The **RISD** Museum



January 17 – April 6, 2003

Historic Wallpapers, 1750–1949

This exhibition is the result of a collaboration between the Department of Decorative Arts at The RISD Museum and participants in a graduate seminar directed by Professor Catherine Wilkinson Zerner, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, Brown University.

[fig. 1]

Attrib. to Père Boulard
French, active Rouen,
1730–70
Blue and white Domino
with floral sprays,
ca. 1750
Printed ink on paper,
17 x 13 1/4"
Mary B. Jackson Fund
34.867

[cover]

Attrib. to Tomita
Chinese,
mid-19th century
Wallpaper panel (detail)
Hand painted on paper,
53 3/4 x 22 3/4"
49.135b



In the 18th century, European and American interiors were transformed by the rise of a new kind of wall treatment. Wallpaper – mass-produced, affordable, and highly practical – reached a broader audience than fine prints and paintings. This wide distribution prompted wallpaper artists to heed the contemporary interests of the expanding consumer class. As a result, wallpaper often recorded social changes as they were expressed in the shifting relationship between high art and popular culture throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Origins

The earliest forms of wallpaper can be traced back to printed sheets called Dominos. These papers could either be pasted one by one onto a wall or could serve smaller-scale purposes such as endpapers for books or linings for wardrobes, drawers, or boxes. Because they could easily be printed in quantity, they were less expensive than fabric or paintings. Along with their functional versatility, their affordability made Dominos very accessible. Initially, they tended to serve as ornaments in humble settings. By the turn of the 18th century, however, Dominos had evolved from cheap prints for simple homes into valued decorative papers utilized by every social class.

Much of the inspiration for patterned Dominos came from printed cotton textiles imported from India and China, primarily through French Mediterranean ports. The exotic foliage of the Museum's Dominos recalls Indian chintz textiles in particular [fig. 1]. When a number of Dominos were pasted to the wall, they mimicked rooms decorated entirely with fabric. Such "chintz rooms" were fashionable in the early 18th century, but because the fabric was imported and often heavily taxed, paper provided a reasonably priced alternative.

Single-sheet Dominos decorated walls until continuous rolls of printed paper were developed in the late 18th century and sold by large manufacturing firms. While Dominos led to a proliferation of wallpaper types, economic changes and technological innovation eventually reduced demand for these hand-printed sheets.

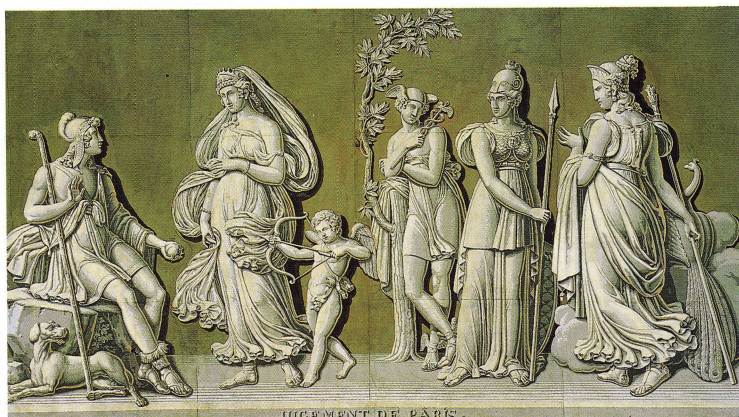
Enlightenment Classicism

In France, the nascent wallpaper industry coincided with the neoclassical revival of the Enlightenment. Early mass-produced wallpapers contain abundant references to Greek and Roman subjects [fig. 2]. This vogue for classical decorative schemes was due to a renewal of interest in the ancient past that accompanied the accidental rediscovery of the Roman sites of Herculaneum in 1713 and Pompeii in 1748. The beautifully preserved wall paintings found in homes at these sites inspired many formal characteristics of the Museum's papers: broad expanses of color, perspectival recession, pagan religious objects [note the incense burner in fig. 3], and unusual ornamental motifs, including intricately twined foliage and strange mythological creatures, among them caryatids, griffins, and chimeras.

Such wallpaper makers as Xavier Mader designed a number of papers whose subjects are drawn from Greek and Roman mythology. The *Judgment of Paris* [fig. 2] features the famous beauty contest among the gods in which Paris names Venus as the winner. Minerva and Juno, defeated, stand near Mercury, who is identifiable by his winged helmet. The wallpaper panel resembles the stone frieze of an ancient temple and would likely have been flanked by a customized array of other papers featuring illusionistic cornices, balustrades, and columns [fig. 4]. These architectural motifs framed the central scene, reinforcing its classical theme while conveying the idea that the wallpaper is a work of art.

The Exotic

In commercial competition with classical-theme wallpapers were those depicting exotic places, particularly the Far East. Such *chinoiserie* wallpa-

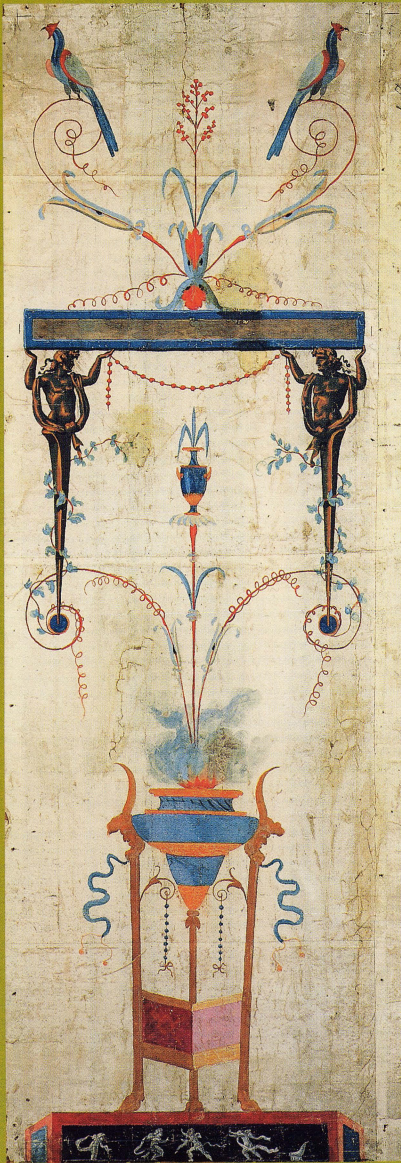


pers peaked in popularity during the reign of Louis XV in France (1715-74), in conjunction with a booming market in objects imported from China. Often an entire room would be decorated in the Chinese taste and dedicated to the display of Chinese lacquerware, porcelains, and textiles.

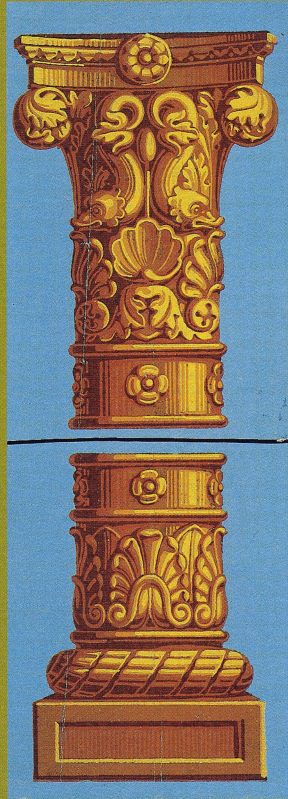
European-made *chinoiserie* designs, such as the 1780 paper attributed to Jean-Baptiste Pillement [fig. 5], often reflect the cultural biases of their time. In the central group of figures, for example, the Chinese person assumes a subservient position to the Western woman, mirroring the sense of cultural superiority that marked this period of European colonial expansion. As Edward Said pointed out in his groundbreaking study *Orientalism* (New York: 1978), such imagery represents more than just "an airy European fantasy about the Orient." It helped to create the ideological justifications that Europeans used to perpetuate their domination of other cultures.

In contrast, wallpapers actually designed by Chinese artisans often drew on a sophisticated and ancient Chinese painting tradition [cover and fig. 6]. These papers were produced exclusively for export to the West. Despite the value placed on their work abroad, Chinese wallpaper designers did not enjoy high esteem in their own land, where their trade was regarded as a minor craft. Unlike Chinese painters and calligraphers, who were well educated in Confucian doctrine and enjoyed high social status, these artisans were typically from the lower ranks of society and were often illiterate.

[fig. 2]
Xavier Mader, designer
French, 1789-1830
Joseph Dufour and
Company, manufacturer
Paris, France, fl. 1804-36
Judgment of Paris, 1814
Block print on paper;
41 3/4 x 83 1/2"
Mary B. Jackson Fund
34.996



[fig. 3]
 Etienne de Lavallée-Poussin,
 designer
 French, 1735-1802
 Jean-Baptiste Reveillon,
 manufacturer
 French, 1725-1811
Wallpaper panel, ca. 1790
 Printed and hand-painted in
 tempera on paper, 51 x 15 3/4"
 Mary B. Jackson Fund
 34.959



[fig. 4]
 French
 Probably Joseph Dufour and
 Company; or Zuber and
 Company; manufacturer
 Paris, France, fl. 1804-36; or
 Rixheim, France, 1790-present
Base and capital, ca. 1810-20
 Block print on laid paper;
 capital: 9 3/8 x 6 7/16";
 base: 7 9/16 x 6 13/16"
 Mary B. Jackson Fund
 34.1125, 34.1126



[fig. 5]
 Attrib. to Jean-Baptiste Pillement
 French, 1728-1808
Wallpaper fragment, ca. 1780
 Block print on paper,
 67 1/4 x 16"
 Mary B. Jackson Fund
 34.875



One of the Museum's Chinese wallpaper fragments [fig. 6] depicts an imaginary scene of daily life among the elite in the 18th century. The social status and role of each figure may be inferred from costume and gesture. The refined dress of the mustached man in the upper left indicates that he is the master of this wealthy household. One of his children (?) peeks out from behind him. A family consultant stands to his right, and a servant lingers in back of them. To their right, two children, presumably the master's sons, enliven the scene as they playfully fight with each other over a porcelain (?) fish.

The lure of the exotic applied not only to the Far East, but also to wild and isolated corners of the world. Often, wallpapers were conceived as panoramic environments, so that 19th-century armchair adventurers could imagine themselves lost in distant and untamed places. According to philosopher Walter Benjamin, such a scene could convert the room of its wealthy owner into a "box [seat] in the theater of the world," and thus serve as an expression of the political and economic dominion that urban consumers had attained unequivocally by the 19th century (see Benjamin's *Reflections*. New York/London: 1978, pp. 149-50). The Museum's panel, part of a series entitled *El Dorado*, refers to a mythical city of gold sought by the Spanish in the New World [fig. 7]. It is part of a continuous, room-sized wallpaper scene of 24 rolls. When complete, the panorama features four sets of panels depicting a global array of imaginary vistas, including the Vera Cruz region of Mexico, a terrace beside an Italian lake, Turkish buildings along the Bosphorus strait, and Egyptian antiquities near the Nile. A daunting number of separate woodblocks – over fifteen hundred – was used to handprint the entire masterwork.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

The sweeping technological advances of the mid-19th century gave rise to an increasingly automated, factory-based wallpaper industry. While these changes made wallpapers available to a wider clientele, they made obsolete the laborious print-

[fig. 7]
 Eugène Ehrmann,
 Georges Zipélius,
 and Joseph Fuchs,
 designers
 French
 Zuber and Company,
 manufacturer
 Rixheim, France,
 1790-present
El Dorado, designed
 ca. 1848, produced
 ca. 1890-1900
 Block print
 on wove paper,
 126 x 22"
 Gift of Richard
 and Inge Chafee in
 memory of Zechariah
 and Mary Dexter
 Chafee and their
 daughter, Mary
 94.101.1



[fig. 10]

Alexander Calder,
designer

American, 1898-1976

Laverne Originals,
manufacturer

New York, New York,
founded 1938

Spotchy, 1949

Screenprint on paper,
372 x 55 1/2 "

Abby Rockefeller

Mauzé Fund

82.098

[fig. 11]

Spotchy installed
in Mrs. Dorothy
Rautford's kitchen,
Glencoe, Illinois.

Image in Jean Lipman,
ed. Ruth Wolfe, *Calder's
Universe*. New York:

1976, p. 190.

Photo by Idaka;
courtesy Whitney
Museum of
American Art,
New York.

wallpaper." Although one might find Alexander Calder's actual wallpaper of 1949, *Spotchy* [fig. 10], more amusing than apocalyptic, it does bear a superficial resemblance to Pollock's famous "drip" paintings. Although *Spotchy* is most closely related to the art of Joan Miró, the energetic whirl of dots, dashes, sprays, and smears of color orchestrated into a cohesive, large-scale composition does suggest an ironic nod to Pollock and the other "gestural" abstract expressionists. Indeed, the playful title and whimsical design are a wry inversion of the high-minded seriousness and existential posture of New York School painters.

The use of screenprinting, which in 1949 was associated not with fine art but with the mass production of popular images, also indicates a prescient challenge to the divide between high and low culture. This issue would later become the primary focus of Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, who also favored the screenprint process. The conditions under which *Spotchy* was manufactured helped to foster its proto-Pop aspects. Erwin and Estelle Laverne established Laverne Originals in 1938 after training as painters at the Art Student's League of New York under abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann. Throughout its existence, Laverne Originals made concrete efforts to bridge the gap between fine and applied arts, in the process supporting and stimulating many artists.

Spotchy was dramatically featured in many middle-class homes, such as that of Mrs. Dorothy Rautford in Glencoe, a northern suburb of Chicago [fig. 11]. Installed in the kitchen, *Spotchy* covered not only the walls, but the ceiling as well. Whether in a gallery, museum, or household, Calder's work invades the viewer's space, even from above. In this way, Calder challenged the boundary between art and life, elevating the realm of the popular and the everyday.



Participants in the Historic Wallpaper project are Brown University graduate students Eva Allen, Catherine Anderson, Vanessa Anderson, Alexis Goodin, Alice Klima, Timothy More, Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, Kathy Quick, and Shiyuan Yuan; Professor Catherine W. Zerner, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, Brown University; Curators Thomas Michie and Jayne Stokes of the Department of Decorative Arts, The RISD Museum; and Brown University Proctor René Morales.

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Suggested Reading

Hapgood, Marilyn, *Wallpaper and the Artist: From Dürer to Warhol*. New York: 1992.

Hoskins, Lesley, *The Papered Wall: History, Pattern, Technique*. New York: 1983.

Impey, Oliver, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*. London: 1977.

Lynn, Catherine, *Wallpaper in America: From the Seventeenth Century to World War I*. New York: 1980.

Noever, Peter, ed., *Dagobert Peche and the Wiener Werkstätte*. New Haven: 2002.

Saunders, Gill, "Painted Paper of Peking': Chinese Wallpaper in England," in *V & A Album*. London: 1983, pp. 306-11.

———, *Wallpaper in Interior Decorations*. New York: 2002.



ing processes that created such finely wrought works as *El Dorado*. The second half of the 19th century witnessed responses to poorly designed and cheaply made factory goods, which embodied the alienation felt by both laborers and consumers in an increasingly mechanized world. The Arts and Crafts movement sought to counteract the perceived soullessness and depersonalization of mass production by reviving fine design and handicraft. English critics and designers such as John Ruskin and William Morris particularly admired the medieval tradition of artisans working together in small, cooperative groups or guilds.

Although goods produced by such methods could never compete on the open market with less expensive, machine-made products, they did eventually inspire an improvement in the overall quality of mass-produced wares, an example of which is the Museum's Morris-style wallpaper [fig. 8]. The muted palette of creamy yellow flowers and light-green leaves would have provided a subtle and warm effect in the Providence home of Miss Esther Baker, this paper's original setting.

Modernist Revisions

In the early 20th century, Dagobert Peche reinvented the Morris tradition of lush floral wallpaper with a cutting-edge modernism, in effect bridging two diametrically opposed visual approaches to design [fig. 9]. While preserving some of the organic complexity associated with the English Arts and Crafts movement, the use of a stark black-and-white palette, the transparency of process, and a bold emphasis on line reflect the stripped down look preferred by early 20th-century Northern European designers as they

reduced compositions – whether ornamental, painterly, or architectural – to their most fundamental elements.

Spitze was one of several wallpapers that Peche created for the Flammersheim & Steinmann Company in Cologne, Germany, while he was working with the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshops). These designers shared with the earlier Arts and Crafts movement a belief that quality design could improve the lives of modern individuals and heal the social rifts caused by industrial labor practices. Unlike the Arts and Crafts movement, the Wiener Werkstätte rejected complicated decoration and embraced the use of machines. The group's commitment to improving physical conditions for urban masses through forward-looking design links the Werkstätte with the Bauhaus school of architecture and design in Germany. Peche's work defines a second phase of the Werkstätte, when the group moved away from the pure geometry of its founders, Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser, toward more dynamic, asymmetrical compositions.

Proto-Pop Wallpaper

In an oft-quoted essay, "The American Action Painters" (in *The Tradition of the New*, New York: 1961, p. 34), art critic Harold Rosenberg referred to Jackson Pollock's paintings as "apocalyptic



[fig. 8]
British
Wallpaper fragment, 1882
Embossed and printed
paper, 11 1/4 x 11 1/4"
Gift of N. David
Barry Scotti
2002.39.14

[fig. 9]
Dagobert Peche, designer
Austrian, 1887-1923
Flammersheim &
Steinmann,
manufacturers
Cologne, Germany,
ca. 1919-60
Spitze (Lace), 1920
Roller print on wove
paper, 25 1/2" x 22"
Gift of Norman
Herreshoff
84.235

[fig. 6]

Chinese, Qing dynasty

(1644-1911)

Court Scene, ca. 1770

Hand painted on rice paper,

54 1/4 x 49 1/8"

Mary B. Jackson Fund

34.862

